

Making Things Right
Kol Nidre 2009
Rabbi Jeffrey A. Summit

If we do it right, the period between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur can have a profound impact on our lives. I'm not talking about the time we spend in services, or even the prayers we say, or the honest desire we feel in our hearts that moves us toward change and growth. I'm speaking about the actions that we take to set our world right, to ask for forgiveness, to affect atonement on this day when the gates of teshuvah stand open before us.

I want to share a story with you that happened last week. This is very much a true story and of course, the name I'm using here is not the person's real name. So, I'm on email and I receive this note from one of our kid's friend, from a while ago, a guy who had spent a lot of time in our home when our kids were all in high school. We hadn't spoken in four or five years, but he had been a presence in our lives years back and I was pleased and surprised to see his name come up on my email. This is what I read:

"Dear Jeff,

It has been a very long time since I've seen you and your family. I hope this email, somewhat out of the blue, finds you well.

The reason I'm writing is to make an extremely belated apology to you and Gail. Several times when I was a guest in your home, years ago, I stole liquor from you. Essentially I would just sneak to your cabinets and take a glass or two. I'm very sorry for that, not so much because of what I took (although I am sorry for that), but more because it was so disrespectful to you. You and Gail were so welcoming to me -- feeding me and allowing me to lounge around your home. I realize you may have never been aware of the theft, but I still should not have treated you that way."

He continued:

"As you may have guessed this comes in the context of me trying to sort out my life. The end of high school and particularly the beginning of college were difficult times for me, and I behaved in a variety of sick and compulsive ways. I don't mean this as an excuse, but by way of explanation.

I've sent you a \$20 Whole Foods gift card that should arrive in the next couple of days. I feel a little embarrassed about it, but wanted to give you a material token of my apology. I hope you'll accept it.

My best wishes to you, and take care,

Jason"

I felt a mix of emotions reading his email and I just sat there for a while thinking back to that time, remembering him in our home, recalling conversations we had together. After thinking for a while, I wrote this in response:

"Dear Jason,

I deeply appreciate your email and the courage it took to send it. I see life as a difficult process and the most we can ask is that people take responsibility for their actions and change in the essential ways that reflect that which they come to value. At the very base of my theological approach to the world is the belief that people can change. I've seen this in myself, in making hard-won changes over the years. The thing about change is that, while it is possible, it is -- at least in my experience -- so difficult. You might know that Maimonides writes about this quite a bit and he says that the first step in transformative change is to face and admit what we've done wrong to ourselves and determine that we do not want such actions to define us in the future. Then one apologizes to the person who we wronged. Then the next step is to recompense the other person for any loss they have experienced through your actions. This is the path to real teshuvah (change, redirection, growth). You have done all of those things and I am only left with respect for you and my wishes that you continue in a way that brings you satisfaction and happiness. I fully accept your apology and I appreciate the gift certificate as a nice way to even out and clear the slate.

Warm regards and thank you again, Jeff"

Now, what happened in that exchange? The fact is, I had never noticed that some liquor was missing, so I wasn't carrying about the hurt that someone had wronged or stolen from us. But this was clearly weighing on Jason over the years, and he quickly wrote in reply to my email: "Thank you for your kind words, much more than I could have expected." And the truth is, I received more than I expected in that exchange. I was moved by Jason's courage in writing and the sincerity of his apology, plus the fact that he actually wanted to make good on what he had taken from us. My estimation and respect of him rose.

One of the most important teachings in the Jewish tradition is that our actions matter in this world. While I recognize that it's a complicated process, I believe in reward and punishment: we are rewarded for the things we do right. We are punished for the things we do wrong. What goes around, eventually comes around. The rabbis talk about reward and punishment in three areas: This first is society and the courts. Ours is a tradition of personal responsibility. A tremendous amount of biblical and rabbinic literature addresses the importance of establishing a just society with honest and impartial judges, fair courts, valid witnesses and setting up systems to assess liability and assign fair punishment. The second area where the Jewish tradition deals with reward and punishment is in our understanding of the hereafter; the world to come. There's little we can know about what happens after we die, and our tradition just never put a lot of energy into describing or imaging "heaven" or "hell" in any detail. We're much more focused on how people act in this world. Still, the rabbis clearly believe that

the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished. I believe that a profound way we are rewarded or punished after we die has to do with the legacy, the reputation and the memories we create by our actions in life. We do live on with other people after we pass away and our actions determine how we are remembered and spoken about when we're gone.

But I think the most profound reward and punishment actually takes place as we live our lives day after day. My mantra on this topic is the Mishna in Pirkei Avot 4:2 where Ben Azai teaches, "S'car mitzvah, mitzvah. U'scar averah, averah." The reward for doing a mitzvah is the experience of immersing yourself in that action. The reward for observing Shabbat is the experience I get from stopping, thinking, relaxing and being with people I love. The punishment for not observing Shabbat is missing an opportunity for meaning and joy in my life that can never be recovered. The punishment for stealing liquor from your friend's parents while they welcome you into their home is that you live for years in that yucky place of knowing you've betrayed a trust and acted in a way that ultimately causes you to replay, think back and feel bad about who you are and what you did.

Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, wrote a book called *Orot HaTeshuvah* (The Lights of Repentance). He teaches that sin primarily harms the sinner, because when we sin, we are cut off from the roots of our very existence; from the light of our soul. This estrangement is sin's worst punishment. We have no place where we feel at ease, at home, ourselves. Teshuvah, repentance and redress, on the other hand, redeems the sinner from this darkness. It rejuvenates us and returns us to our previous state of life and joy.

It would be wonderful if we could go through our lives without making mistakes, without acting thoughtlessly or selfishly, without losing our temper and yelling or saying nasty things behind peoples' backs. If we had that kind of control, we could enter a new year knowing that we are free of those actions that hold us back from being the person we most want to be. But that is not how real human beings live their lives. As we say in the prayers for Yom Kippur tonight and tomorrow, "Hatanu, pashanu, we have done things wrong, things by accident and things on purpose." Now, if we really look honestly at ourselves and all that we did over the past months, we have work to do before we can move into this new year that is about to begin.

When I told my wife Gail about Jason's email, and forwarded her a copy, she said, "Yes, I remember when liquor was missing from the cabinet. I always thought it was the house painter when we were painting the kitchen back then." "The guy we didn't rehire?" I asked. "Yes, but that wasn't the reason. Remember we didn't really like working with him so much," she replied. But who knows. Maybe the misplaced suspicions had colored that relationship. When a wrong is done, we set the world out of balance, sometimes in ways that we don't fully see at the time.

I learned this next part, about the difference between Greek tragedy and Jewish theology, from my friend Paul Wessel. He says, if you remember your Aristotle, the definition of tragedy is a story in which a great person is brought down by a tragic flaw.

In the pivotal scene, called “the recognition scene” in classical theater, he comes to understand what he has done wrong, but it is too late to save himself. From that point on, he is doomed and he knows he is doomed. After he recognizes his flaw, he is permitted redemption by nobly facing his fate. We in the audience experience a catharsis and share in his redemption as we witness his tragic end. That is the nature of Greek tragedy: no room for a second chance.

Jews and Greeks were very different -- one of the reasons our people fought the Maccabean Wars. As Jews, we deeply believe in second chances, and for that matter, third and fourth chances as well. One of the central messages of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that the possibility for change, for redirection, for reconciliation exists in our lives. At this time of year, we say to those around us, “May you be inscribed for blessing,” and then as we enter Yom Kippur, we say, “May you be sealed for blessing in the book of life.” But we don’t have to wait or rely on God to do that inscribing and sealing. We set the course for our lives by the decisions we make every day. Do we take responsibility for our actions? Do we make the call, or write the email when we’ve done something wrong, or thoughtless? Are we honest with ourselves about the changes we need to make as the new year begins?

The story is told of a trickster who came to a town and thought he would show up the local rabbi, who had a reputation for being wise and insightful. So as the rabbi is finishing a devar, the trickster stands up in the crowd and says, “Oh, wise rabbi, they say you know so much but can you answer a simple question for me?” The rabbi replies, “I’ll try.” The man then holds up his closed hand and says, “In my hand, I have a small bird. Can you simply tell me if this bird is alive or dead?” The rabbi thinks for a moment and understands the trick. If he says the bird is dead, the man opens his hand and the bird flies away. If the rabbi says the bird is alive, the man squeezes a bit tighter, and the bird is dead. So the rabbi answers, “My friend, this question is not for me to decide. The power of life or death is in your hand. It’s up to you to chose.”

On this Kol Nidre Eve, the year to come stretches before us. Things will happen that we can’t control, and we will do our best to face them with grace and strength. But a tremendous amount of what happens in our lives is firmly within our grasp. We can chose to repeat the same mistakes over and over again or we can consider our actions carefully, take the second chances presented by this new year, reach out to those we have wronged, apologize and do what we need to in order to set things right. May our actions seal us all for blessings in the book of life.